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Aircraft Participate in Joint Training for Arkansas Wildfire Response

MALVERN, ARK. – Two Black Hawk helicopters and crews from the Arkansas Army National Guard at Camp Robinson trained Wednesday with Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) planes from the Arkansas Forestry Commission (AFC) at the Malvern Airport. The aircraft were training for joint wildfire response by targeting water drops at a simulated wildfire nearby.

How do aircraft fit into wildfire suppression? Dozers are the first line of defense in wildfire suppression. Wildfires are suppressed by the construction of fire breaks, which dozers scrape down to mineral soil around the fire's perimeter to separate flames from their primary fuel source. When fires are burning too hot or fast for dozers to contain, aerial wildfire suppression tactics are needed.

SEATs are brought to Arkansas on contract through the AFC during Arkansas's two primary wildfire seasons, which are: February to April and August to October. SEAT planes can unload 500-800 gallons per drop from tanks located on the bottom side of planes. AFC dozer crews request SEAT planes through the AFC Dispatch Center when the severity of a wildfire makes assistance necessary. Black Hawk helicopters from the Arkansas Army National Guard also may be called upon to assist AFC SEAT planes during a highly active wildfire season. Black Hawks carry up to 500 gallons of water to drop using Bambi Buckets, which are large orange buckets suspended by cables from the helicopters.

Using a worst case wildfire scenario, where dozer crews, SEATs, and Black Hawk helicopters all must work together to attack the same wildfire, was the profile for Wednesday's pre-fire season training. Protocols for safety, dispatching, communicating, and making the actual water drops were the focus of the joint training event. Gaining experience in working safely together is necessary before a bad wildfire season occurs.

"When we train together ahead of time, we reduce the risk of running into surprises during an actual emergency," says AFC Training Coordinator Kevin Kilcrease. "We appreciate the willingness of our partners at the Arkansas Army National Guard to participate in live training exercises – which help us all train to safely protect Arkansans," he said.

"Aerial firefighting is one of the key homeland security missions our crews train to support," said Col. John Payne, state aviation officer for the Arkansas Army National Guard. "Training with partner agencies is invaluable in honing critical skills needed to protect our fellow Arkansans."

The mission of the AFC is to protect Arkansas' forests, and those who enjoy them, from wildland fire and natural hazards, while promoting rural and urban forest health, stewardship, development and conservation for all generations of Arkansans. To report a wildfire, or inquire about wildfire danger, call the AFC Dispatch Center at 1-800-468-8834. To report an emergency, dial 911. Stay updated on AFC updates and warnings at www.arkfireinfo.org or www.forestry.arkansas.gov.

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